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Crime & Court

Thursday, December 18, 2008

Christmas comes to Sussex prison

During concert in chapel, inmates' voices melded with chorus ensemble

BY DAN SHORTRIDGE • THE NEWS JOURNAL • DECEMBER 18, 2008

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GEORGETOWN -- The plain white chapel was nearly full as the choir prepared to sing, a simple cross hanging on the wall as a backdrop.

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But the audience was dressed in white and orange prison outfits, and just outside the thin chapel windows stretched a fence topped with razor wire.

A choral ensemble clad in black ties brought [Christmas](#) behind bars to more than 150 inmates at Sussex Correctional Institute on Tuesday, the sounds of the holiday bursting forth in an unexpected place.

The men erupted in applause to hear the music, an ongoing tradition and collaboration between the Georgetown prison and the Southern Delaware Choral Society.

"This is one of the highlights of our year," said

the Rev. John Ranney, conductor.

The singers switched effortlessly from English to Latin, Hebrew to German, as the 14 members of the ensemble performed music from the traditional and popular to the esoteric -- "Ding Dong Merrily on High," "What Child Is This?" and "Christmas Cometh Caroling."

Inmates' voices melded with ensemble singers' for a rising rendition of "Silent Night," and many of the men joined in for the concluding "Hallelujah Chorus."

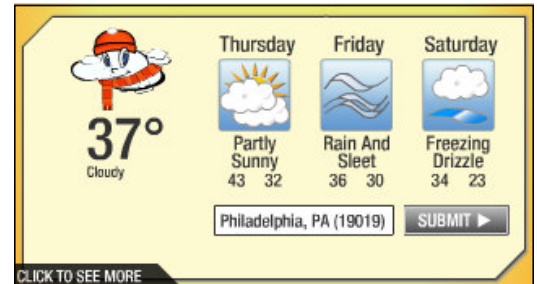
Inmate David Van Sant, 50, of Dover, said he's attended the concerts for the last three years, and especially looked forward to the selection from Handel's "Messiah."

"I'm glad they come," he said. "It's great having an [organization](#) take an interest in the men in the prison. If they came in the summertime, it would be wonderful!"

For the choral ensemble members -- a select group of singers from the more than 65-member choral society -- it was a chance to shine a light for people in a dark time.

The prison concerts developed about eight years ago, the brainchild of Barbara DelMastro, director of The Way Home program, an initiative for ex-offenders, said [organizer](#) Dan Tabler.

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The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH

The Southern Delaware Choral Society performs for inmates Wednesday evening at Sussex Correctional Institution near Georgetown. More than 150 inmates attended the concert -- which started about eight years ago. The group spends months practicing and performs many times at several Sussex functions during the holiday season.
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For many of the ensemble members, it's their first time inside the prison, he said.

The members are the "brightest and best" of the choral society, and must audition to join, said Executive Director Gail Launay.

The society performed its big concert over the weekend, and has kept a busy [schedule](#).

"We've been singing and singing," Launay said.

Ranney developed a repartee with the inmates, joking with them about keeping the songs on track.

He said the group has been practicing the pieces since September.

"Now, it's fun. Back in October, it was un-fun," he said to appreciative chuckles from the audience. "These things take a lot of practice."

Contact Dan Shortridge at 856-7373 or dshortridge@delawareonline.com.

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I agree 100% truthfully. These criminals don't deserve a damn thing. Especially not concerts and entertainment that's on taxpayer dime. These thugs are there to serve time, not enjoy concerts.

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